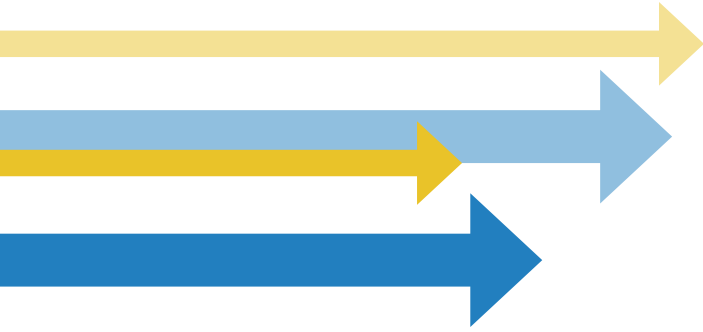


# Communicating Through COVID-19 and Beyond

*Impact and Insights from the Field of Public Health*





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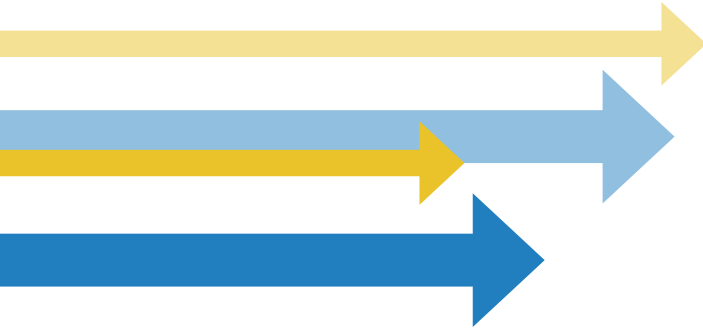
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## Dear Colleagues,

COVID-19 has impacted every country, every community, and every person around the world. The communications trials posed by the pandemic have been some of the most demanding and consequential of our time, as misinformation and politicization have made defending public health more difficult than ever before. Despite these challenges, public health communicators have played a vital role in keeping people healthy and informed.

Since 2020, the Public Health Communications Collaborative has worked to produce timely, science-based resources to support anyone who communicates about public health in their work. As we enter another year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this report spotlights individuals who have been at the heart of the effort and examines what we can learn from their challenges and successes.

Leading up to the two-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted a national survey and received more than 600 responses from 51 states and territories. We heard from commissioners, public information officers, community health workers, contact tracers, educators, program directors, nurses, and more.

Our team reviewed every submission, and we are deeply grateful to everyone who took the time to share stories of survival and empathy, mistakes and lessons, frustration and hope, and compassion for your communities. These reflections highlight the immense impact of public health communicators since 2020 and offer a powerful wealth of insights for protecting public health through COVID-19 and beyond.

Thank you for your service in protecting public health.

**Sincerely,**  
**PHCC Organizing Partners**

*J. Nadine Gracia, MD, MSCE, Trust for America's Health*

*Brian C. Castrucci, DrPH, de Beaumont Foundation*

*Judy Monroe, MD, CDC Foundation*

*Monica Valdes Lupi, JD, MPH, Managing Director, Health, The Kresge Foundation*

**Public Health  
Communications  
COLLABORATIVE**



THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



# About the Survey

*Two Years, Two Questions, Two Minutes of Your Time.* That is what we prompted our community in January 2022, in the lead-up to the two-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic declaration. In response, more than 600 people from across the country submitted reflections and insights.

# 610

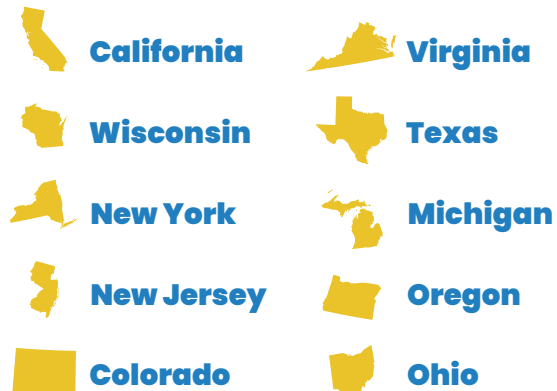
Total Survey Responses

# 49 STATES

represented, plus  
Puerto Rico and the U.S.  
Virgin Islands

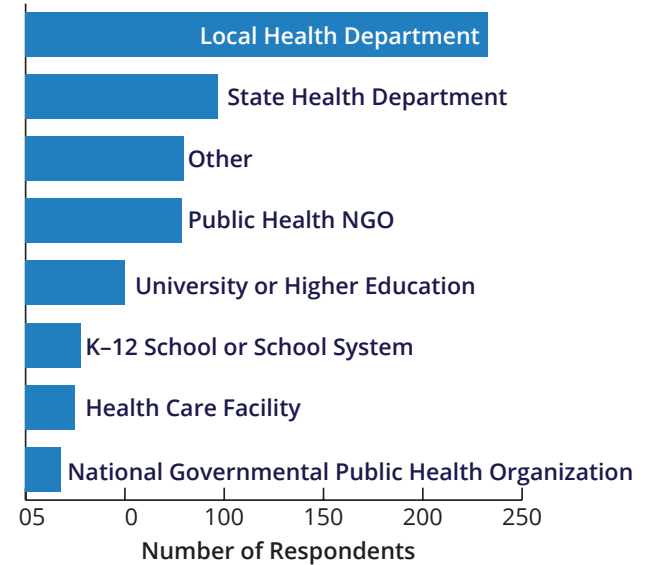
## STATES WITH MOST RESPONSES

We heard from public health professionals from across the country, from the nation's largest cities to rural communities with fewer than 50 hospital beds. Respondents reflected a wide range of geographic diversity, including local demographic makeup and political landscape.



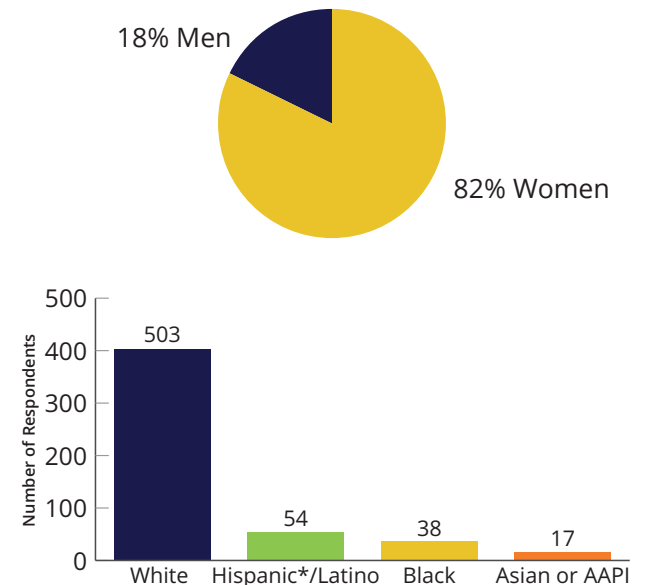
## WHERE THEY WORK

The majority of respondents work at health departments on the local (38%) or state (16%) level. Across departments, facilities, schools, and NGOs, survey respondents also hold a variety of roles—including public health directors and commissioners, program officers, communications leads, contact tracers, nurses, and more.



## DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic information was optional and self-reported and does not reflect 100 percent of respondents. The PHCC team proactively reached out to additional public health communicators to ensure that “Spotlights from the Field” represent a wide range of voices, communities, and learnings.



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories

# We Asked, You Answered

**#1** Reflecting back to the start of the pandemic, the one tool or skill I could have used to be a more effective public health communicator is...



### Digital Savvy

Creating graphics and videos, hosting virtual events, utilizing social platforms.



### Plain Language & Accessibility

Translating science and guidance into messaging that is accessible for all.



### Crisis & Risk Communications 101

Going back to basics on the guiding principles for communicating risk and navigating uncertainty.



### Media & Talking Points

Training on how to communicate topline talking points and convey core messaging.



### Countering Misinformation

Identifying and responding to misinformation, and teaching others how to do so as well.



### Community Partnership

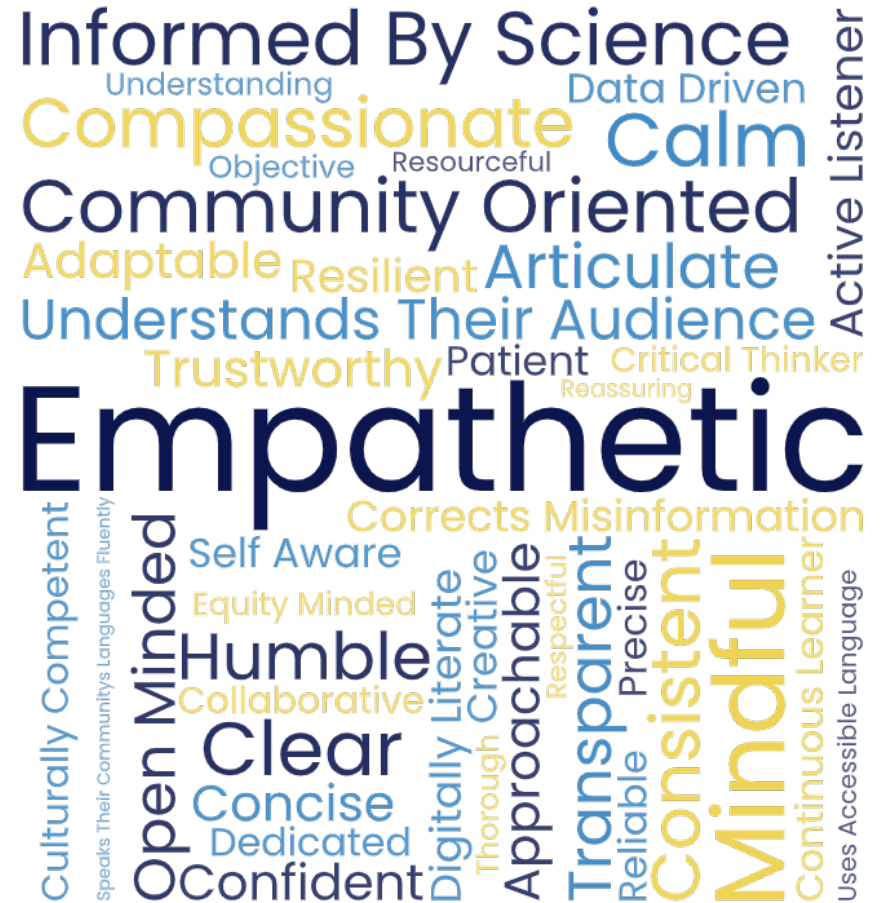
Cultivating collaborations on the local and state level.



### Cultural Competence

Embedding equity in messaging and understanding historical context relevant to communications.

**#2** In 2022, the traits of an effective public health communicator are...





## Gloria Coronado, MA

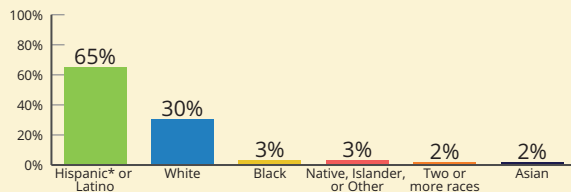
Health Promotions Program Manager, Yuma County Public Health Services District, AZ

### Yuma County, Arizona

Population: 203,881<sup>1</sup>



### DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>3</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



The Yuma area produces about 90% of all the leafy vegetables grown in the United States from November to March, and has a large seasonal population of migrant workers.<sup>4</sup>

# Placing Health Literacy at the Center

## Creating Accessible Communications for All Residents

*"We are the public health experts, but we knew the information was confusing and always changing. We had to make things as easy to understand as possible."*

—GLORIA CORONADO

Gloria Coronado describes Yuma County as a border town on multiple planes: "We share a border with Mexico, and we share a border with California. We have people coming for services from several directions," she says. Yuma County's permanent residents are predominately Hispanic, though the population fluctuates throughout the year. During the winter, the region experiences up to 45% population growth from "snowbirds" traveling from other parts of the country to enjoy warmer weather. Yuma, known as the "Winter Vegetable Capital of the World" for its booming agricultural industry that produces approximately 90% of leafy greens in the United States, also employs a large population of migrant workers who commute from Mexico or California each winter.

"Most of our residents are bilingual or only speak Spanish," says Coronado, "and there is not equal access to digital information or platforms." This directly impacted strategies for vaccine rollout in late 2020 and early 2021. Coronado says many of the people who had access to the information or technology to register for vaccines were not necessarily permanent residents, but seasonal, long-term visitors from other states whose winter visits overlapped with the vaccine rollout. In response, the health department shifted its approach to make vaccines more accessible for all. "We went back to the basics. We passed out flyers in English and Spanish, we partnered with local nonprofits to do direct outreach to migrant workers, and we were proactive in providing phone numbers to schedule a vaccine appointment with a bilingual volunteer. Even if we didn't have a vaccine opening when someone called us for help, we always called them back," she says. Coronado describes the grassroots and bilingual outreach as critical to building trust with people who felt frustrated over the inequities during the vaccine rollout.

"It also became challenging once people knew that having COVID-19 would affect their ability to go to work," says Coronado. This led to a decrease in responsiveness around

contact tracing. The department shifted its approach to focus less on contact tracing and more on sharing easy to understand resources about what to do when feeling sick. This also included sharing graphics instead of just words to depict handwashing, masking, and social distancing. Even if people wouldn't respond to contact tracers, they should still have access to information that could help keep them or their families safe. "We started a partnership with the Mexican Consulate in Yuma, who helped us post information about masking, testing, and vaccinations," says Coronado. "And we expanded our traditional media approach on TV and radio to include partnerships with religious outlets. We wanted to let people know that we would support them however we could."

Coronado credits the department's success with centering health literacy in all the communications they produced, and constantly adapting to meet the needs of all residents. "Prior to COVID-19, I don't think people really knew the health department. Now they know we aren't going anywhere, and no matter what the situation is, we are here to help."

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

**1** Clarity is key. When crafting communications, center health literacy to ensure your audience can obtain, read, understand, and use public health information.

**2** Take an active role in using communications to foster equity. If the needs of all residents are not being met, make a plan to support those who are not being served.



## Julie Pryde, MSW, MPH

Administrator, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, IL

## Awais Vaid, MBBS, MPH

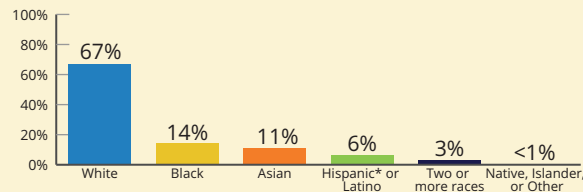
Deputy Administrator and Epidemiologist, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, IL

## Champaign-Urbana, Illinois

Population: 205,865<sup>5</sup>



### DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>6</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



The Champaign-Urbana metropolitan area is home to University of Illinois' flagship campus.

# Embracing Openness Amidst Uncertainty

## Fostering Transparency and Acknowledging Loss

*"We became the trusted source. If we made mistakes or there was miscommunication, we acknowledged those mistakes, and made sure what we were saying was always transparent and up to date." —AWAIS VAID*

Julie Pryde and Awais Vaid share a decades-long professional partnership at the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, where they guide the county through uncertainty by embracing an honest and open communications strategy.

"What we tell you today is what we know today. It may change tomorrow or the next hour, and we will come back and let you know." That's how Vaid explains the district's approach to pandemic communications—leading with transparency, clarity, and candor. During the pandemic, when guidance shifted or understanding of the virus evolved, constituents were used to hearing Pryde and Vaid explain, "We are making this update because this is what science says today."

In addition to a transparent approach to messaging, they also explored how to open new lines of communication and increase accessibility to information. For example, Pryde launched "Ask the Administrator" in 2020, a daily column in the local paper where she answered community-submitted questions for over a year—a channel she credits for deepening engagement with Champaign-Urbana's senior community. "If you answer one person's question, they're going to help you amplify factual information," says Pryde. Over the course of the pandemic, the department made a conscious choice to go to where the questions were and talk to as many people as possible. Rather than shy away from uncertainty, they employed an "all-of-the-above" approach to outreach. This included everything from a COVID-19 hotline to updates on the local cable channel to personally answering residents' texts and Facebook messages. The district team positioned themselves as reachable and honest, making sure that communications were easily accessible, so people felt comfortable reaching out.

Beyond COVID-19 data and guidance, they extended their transparent and open approach to support the community in processing grief. Early in the pandemic, a local church

started the Open Hearts Memorial, a visual remembrance of the lives lost in their community. The memorial is now located in front of the Public Health District building, where a heart is added to the installation for every community member who dies from COVID-19. Pryde believes this visibility is a way to make space for collective mourning and remember the impact of COVID-19—even as the community looks to a future where Julie and Awais won't need to share minute-by-minute updates on the pandemic. She says, "It's a way to address our community's loss and grieving. That can sometimes get overshadowed during a crisis. But as we continue to move forward, it is important to remember what we have lost."

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

**1** Own what you know and share what you can. Honesty and transparency can build trust and credibility as crisis communications unfold. This extends to situations and topics that are often difficult to communicate, like acknowledging mistakes or communicating authentically about community loss.

**2** Be accessible. The easier it is for people to ask questions, the more easily you can be positioned as a consistent, trusted and reliable source of information.



## Ashley Briggs, MPH

Director of Public Health, New River Valley Regional Commission, VA

### New River Valley Region, Virginia

Population: 182,147<sup>7</sup>

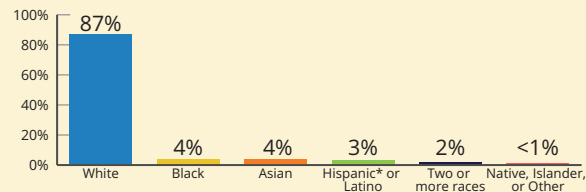


**68%**  
FORESTED



**32%**  
NON-FORESTED<sup>8</sup>

### DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>9</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



The New River Valley consists of four counties and one city, organized as 15 small-town communities.



The region is home to Virginia Tech and Radford University.

# Building Strength and Trust Through Community

## A Unified Approach to Communications

*“Sometimes people feel as though it’s our town versus their town, but the borders are superficial. We’re all on the same team.” —ASHLEY BRIGGS*

Ashley Briggs credits a highly localized and coordinated pandemic response with bringing key parties together to build trust and keep residents safe and healthy. “To survive this crisis, we knew we needed to work together as a community,” she says.

On March 11, 2020, Briggs and other community leaders of the New River Valley region formed The New River Valley Public Health Task Force with local representatives of health, government, education, and business organizations from the region’s four counties and one city. The Task Force met daily to determine how they could meet the diverse needs of their community while building the trust required to spark individual action. They aligned on three key approaches: collaboration, accessibility, and unity.

Though their tactics ranged and evolved over time, centering the needs of New River Valley residents was a constant. For example, knowing that many in the area lacked reliable internet access but traveled many of the same primary roads to work, the Task Force purchased billboards and radio advertisements to share COVID-19 information with people during their commutes. They also engaged the community through creation of “no judgment” spaces where people could get the latest COVID-19 information and ask questions of local fire-fighters, nurses, or teachers—trusted messengers who sat outside of government but had ties to the Task Force. When faced with pushback, the group found strength in numbers.

“Instead of having one group singled out as the sole decision-maker, we were a unified front, which helped people feel like the communications were reliable and truthful. We could say ‘it’s not one school district or organization with this policy, it is all four counties.’ Being able to say we’re all in this together as community leaders helped build trust and validity,” says Briggs.

This wasn’t the first time community members came together in crisis. The New River Valley is also home to Virginia Tech, the 2007 site of the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history. “Prior to the Virginia Tech tragedy, the police didn’t necessarily talk to the schools or the hospitals or the health department. I don’t know if we would have had those communications or relationships in place before COVID-19, if they weren’t formed out of that crisis response.” Today, the Task Force is considering how they can keep building relationships across their community—such as a new initiative that encourages acts of kindness as a way to boost societal health. “The best time to build trust is before a crisis. But holding on to those relationships can build a strong network and support the next generation of leaders.”

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

- 1 A community-wide approach can lead to greater trust and credibility among key audiences. When possible, find opportunities for consensus and build communications that convey a unified effort.
- 2 Coordinated crisis responses can foster cooperation and communication that will benefit the next crisis response. Lessons learned today can be critical for the future.





## Ying-Ying Goh, MD, MSHS

Director of Public Health and Health Officer,  
Pasadena Public Health Department, CA

## Adrienne Kung, MPH

Public Health Preparedness Emergency  
Coordinator, Pasadena Public Health  
Department, CA

## Judith Dunaway, MPH, RD

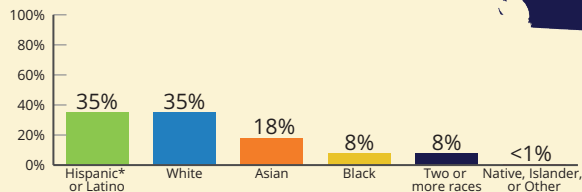
Health Promotion and Policy Development  
Division Manager, Pasadena Public Health  
Department, CA

### Pasadena, California

Population: 138,699<sup>10</sup>



#### DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>11</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



Pasadena covers 23 square miles and has 23 parks, totaling more than 1000 acres of parkland.<sup>12</sup>

# Getting Students Excited about Public Health

## Reaching Children, Families, and Community Members

*“Partnerships are most successful if they’re not just a one-off initiative or event, but embedded in our approach. That’s important not just for pandemic communications, but recovery and beyond.” —DR. YING-YING GOH*

The Pasadena Public Health Department credits long-standing relationships with education partners for a communications strategy that supports the needs of all families and students. “We have had school-based partnerships and vaccine clinics ever since the H1N1 pandemic, and we’ve found them to be a great way to vaccinate students and engage parents,” explains Adrienne Kung, public health preparedness emergency coordinator.

In addition to parent messaging strategies and translated materials, the department also directly engaged students. Borrowing inspiration from a neighboring health department, the Pasadena team launched an art and video contest for students in grades K-12 and college. “We wanted to create content that young people found engaging, and our colleagues were very helpful in sharing their contest materials and lessons learned,” says Judith Dunaway, health promotion and policy development division manager. The Pasadena team developed a process that included kids of all ages, considered art across mediums, and did not require access to technology or the internet to participate—resulting in content for and by young people that could also be featured on the department’s growing social media channels.

The department’s emphasis on education and student engagement also flourished in other creative ways. Through a partnership with the Pasadena-based ArtCenter College of Design, health department staff served as subject matter experts and advisors for a course in 2021. Students and staff explored effective public health communications through the media of art and design.

“The students had universal interest in working on COVID-19 vaccine education and the promotion of better health through the lens of art and design,” says Dr. Ying-Ying Goh, director of public health and health officer. As part of the course, the students created a family-centered interactive

art installation in a local park, which served as a space for community engagement and listening to COVID-19 questions, concerns, and reflections. The process for creating this experience—with the department sharing public health expertise with students, and students sharing their creativity and human-centered design skills with the community—is something staff is hopeful can be replicated in the future.

COVID-19 provided an opportunity for learning and engagement with students of all ages, but Goh emphasizes that these partnerships are more than just a moment in time. “Our relationship is intentional and ongoing. It’s not a one-time thing—it’s intertwined with our efforts to transform our department into a catalyst for health.”

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

**1** Maintain year-round partnerships with schools to reach students, families, teachers, and school staff—from coordinating school-based clinics, utilizing schools’ existing communications channels with the community, to engaging children’s own curiosity and creativity.

**2** People hear, see and comprehend messages in many different forms including art. Consider using artwork offers the opportunity to make your messages more understandable, memorable, and culturally relevant.



## Samantha Hillson, MPH

Director of Health Promotion & Public Information  
Officer, Tompkins County Health Department, NY

## Frank Kruppa, MPA, MPH

Public Health Director and Mental Health  
Commissioner, Tompkins County Health  
Department, NY

## Tompkins County, New York

Population: 105,740<sup>13</sup>

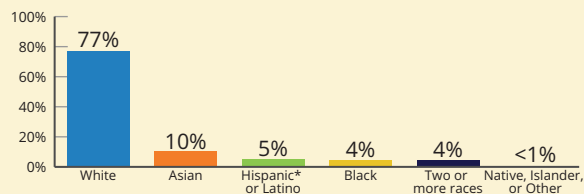


**42%**  
RURAL



**58%**  
URBAN<sup>14</sup>

## DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>15</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



Tompkins County has a growing population of Burmese, Afghan, Venezuelan, and Syrian refugees.<sup>16</sup>



Home to Cornell University and Ithaca College.

# Serving Every Member of the Community

## Deepening Relationships through Ambassador Outreach

*"We've worked with so many community partners throughout the pandemic, and really have leaned on them to further our message to their communities and constituents."*

—SAMANTHA HILLSON

Samantha Hillson has worked at the Tompkins County Health Department for nine years and had hoped to develop a public health community ambassador program long before the pandemic. COVID-19 grant funding made it possible to launch a pilot program in her community.

In summer 2021, the department hired four community ambassadors: 1) a Spanish-speaking resident who previously worked closely with local farmworkers; 2) a local resident, born-and-raised in Ithaca with deep ties to the Black community, who focused on youth outreach; 3) a retired social worker whose experience at assisted-living facilities helped inform outreach to the aging population; and 4) a college student who is part of the local Burmese community to strengthen communications with local refugees. Hillson says, "We recruited people who identified or had strong connections with traditionally marginalized communities in our county, who would know best their community's needs and the best way to reach them."

The new ambassadors canvassed the streets, handed out flyers, held tabling events, and utilized their community relationships to support the county's COVID-19 vaccination campaign. In addition to expanding direct outreach from trusted messengers, the pilot program bolstered the department's broader communications efforts. For example, deepening relationships in the Burmese refugee community through outreach efforts led to an increase of translated materials co-created with residents. The department also put a new emphasis on visual and video resources in response to community feedback about the types of COVID-19 communications that resonated most. And across Tompkins County, a dedicated network of community partners joined weekly public health briefings with Public Health Director Frank Kruppa, which equipped them with consistent and up to

date public health messaging. Hillson credits this consistency as a major trust-builder throughout the pandemic.

After the community ambassador pilot program concluded, the department leveraged its impact to submit a proposal to the Tompkins County legislature and secured additional funding to hire two community health workers for one year. Hillson is hopeful that future budgets will make community health workers a permanent fixture in Tompkins County.

"We want to channel the trust that we've built during the pandemic to address other longstanding public health issues, like mental health or maternal and child health," Hillson says. "In public health there is always more work to be done. We want to keep this good momentum going."

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

**1** Delivering the message is just one crucial role that trusted messengers play. Two-way communications are also critical. Meaningful community partnerships can lead to co-creation of materials and more effective communications strategies.

**2** Establishing trust and credibility on one issue can help open communications channels on others. Consider how building upon crisis-era inroads can lead to new, longer-lasting public health campaigns or strategies



## Nafissa Cisse Egbuonye, PhD, MPH

Public Health Director, Black Hawk County Health Department, IA

### Black Hawk County, Iowa

Population: 131,144<sup>17</sup>

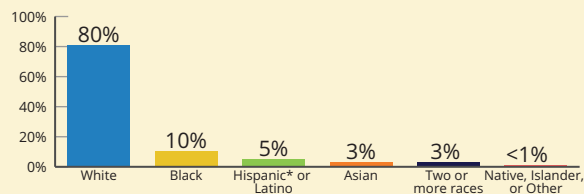


**90%**  
RURAL



**10%**  
URBAN<sup>18</sup>

### DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>19</sup>



\*People who identify as Hispanic may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories



While the vast majority of land in Black Hawk County is rural, only about 13% of residents live in the rural area, as compared to the 87% residing in the urban area.



Over 45 languages are spoken in the Waterloo, Iowa school system in Black Hawk County.

# Advancing Health Equity through Pandemic Communications

## Leading with Humility to Foster Understanding

*“We want our communities to inform our communications. We operate through the lens of ‘nothing for us, without us.’” —DR. NAFISSA CISSE EGBUONYE*

Dr. Nafissa Cisse Egbuonye’s work to champion racial equity as a public health priority in Black Hawk County began long before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, an index created by 24/7 Wall St. analyzing race-based gaps in socioeconomic outcomes, ranked Waterloo, IA in Black Hawk County as the worst place for Black Americans to live in the United States. Dr. Egbuonye embraced this difficult spotlight on the region and used it as fuel. “We had to take this information and show people that we cared about change. We became intentional about leading conversations about health equity and challenging the systems that created racial disparities for our residents.”

The result was the development of a health equity roadmap and a community-informed process to help the public health department answer the question: What accounts for the current level of equity in our community? Dr. Egbuonye says, “We engaged 60–70 stakeholders across the community—in education, business, and nonprofits—to understand their experiences and how we got to the policies we have now.” The relationships formed during the roadmap creation also fostered trust during the pandemic. During a COVID-19 outbreak at a large, local business, Dr. Egbuonye was able to use already open lines of communications to support employees and business owners. “I emphasized how the health of their employees was critical to their business’ success, and the success of our community as a whole,” says Dr. Egbuonye. Using this approach, the public health department was an ally in keeping the community running.

Black Hawk County is also home to a diverse immigrant and refugee population, with dozens of languages spoken in the region. In addition to partnering with translation services, interpreters, nonprofits working with refugees, and trusted messengers, the health department has been intentional in asking people how they want to receive their

communications. “We learned that our Congolese neighbors prefer to use WhatsApp to receive COVID-19 information. The community informs our strategy, and now our Congolese community health worker regularly engages with her community on WhatsApp. With these new channels in place, we can use them to communicate public health information beyond COVID-19,” says Dr. Egbuonye.

Building upon the progress Black Hawk County has made to advance equity in public health communications, Dr. Egbuonye envisions a health department where officials “lead with humility” to connect with their neighbors across the community. “It is important for the community to understand public health. To inform our work, we need to bring public health back to our neighborhoods, our schools and our businesses. Our department has to be visible and approachable for all of our neighbors.”

## Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond

- 1 Acknowledge and understand the historical and systemic circumstances that impact health equity. Outcomes are tied to other social determinants of health—which is why one health issue can’t be tackled alone.
- 2 Know your community. Ask people how they prefer to receive their communications. By tailoring content to preferences and platforms, information can be more effective and engaging for your audiences.

# Tips for Communicating Through COVID-19 & Beyond



- » **Use clear, plain language.** Center health literacy to ensure your audience can obtain, read, understand, and use public health information.
  - » **Know your community.** Ask people what their needs are and how they prefer to receive information, and tailor your communications to them.
  - » **Prioritize collaboration.** Engage and foster community partnerships early on.
  - » **Understand your history.** Acknowledge and understand the historical and systemic circumstances that impact health equity.
  - » **Embrace transparency.** Own what you know and share what you can.
  - » **Be open and reachable.** Make it easy for people to ask you questions.
  - » **Advance health equity.** Ensure that the needs of all residents are included in your communications plan.
  - » **Engage students and families.** Maintain year-round partnerships with schools and tap into the creativity and curiosity of children.
  - » **Use creative channels to communicate.** People hear, see and comprehend messages in many different forms, including art.
  - » **Invite co-creation.** Build trust by seeking and integrating feedback through two-way communications.
  - » **Bridge to other issues.** Consider how building upon crisis-era inroads can lead to new, longer-lasting public health campaigns or strategies.
  - » **Plan for the future.** Maintain the relationships and channels that worked well during the pandemic response to prepare for future crisis communications.
- 
- 

Public Health  
Communications  
COLLABORATIVE

Get more resources  
and public health  
communication tips at:  
[publichealthcollaborative.org](https://publichealthcollaborative.org)

## About PHCC

The Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC) creates and amplifies tools, resources, and learning opportunities for communicators designed to address public health issues, build public confidence, and identify and counter misinformation. Initially formed in August 2020 to provide science-based messaging resources on the COVID-19 pandemic, today PHCC supports communicators on a range of timely issues across the field of public health—working toward a world where everyone has access to the information they need to make decisions about their health.

As a collaborative, PHCC draws on the expertise, insights, and on-the-ground knowledge of its partner network and public health leaders. Four Organizing Partners steer the collaborative: CDC Foundation, the de Beaumont Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Trust for America’s Health.

**Public Health**  
**Communications**  
COLLABORATIVE

## Endnotes

- 1 Quick Facts Yuma County, Arizona Demographics. (2021 July 1). United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/yumacountyarizona>
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